

Lead tokens in Medieval England & finds from Holme Cultram Abbey, Cumbria

Kate Rennicks gave a talk about medieval lead tokens found at Holme Cultram Abbey to the Appleby Archeological Group on the 14th February. She started by pointing out how our interpretation of archaeological remains and the people responsible are sometimes biased because of our tendency to assume they had similar motives and preferences to our own. However her research into medieval tokens suggested past times were often far more complex than might initially appear.

Holme Cultram Abbey in northern Cumbria was founded by Cistercian monks in 1150 on land initially held by Prince Henry of Scotland and later ceded to Henry II of England in 1157. The Abbey initially prospered on reclaimed land along the Solway, producing wool and salt, but later declined. When the monastery community was dissolved in 1538, part of the Abbey was saved as a parish church. Since then, it has been altered and restored at least three times, the last after a devastating fire in 2006 when many of the original monastery records were destroyed.

Archaeological excavation of the Abbey site in 2015 uncovered the cloister, refectory, warming room, kitchen, infirmary and Chapter House. Over 40 lead tokens were found in the Chapter House area of 13-16mm in diameter with nine different designs. Motifs on the obverse and reverse sides of the tokens depicted blacksmith tools, boat and scales, flowers, a crozier, a leaping stag, fleur de lys, stag or cow head denoting a grant of meat, something indecipherable, and a crowned R, perhaps related to a grant by Royal Charter from Richard I to Inglewood, or a token of authority.

The tokens were of almost pure lead with the exception of the crowned R, which was gilded on the obverse and were dated from 1300-1300AD. The lead is assumed to have come from mines at Alston Moor and Caldbeck, where the Abbey had land holdings with evidence of metal working at New Cowper and in the abbey precinct itself.

Similar tokens appeared to have been used fairly widely across England at this time. A 1204 Sentences Commentary by Richard Fishacre reported that tokens of tin were given by the king to paupers on which they could claim charity at a later time. Parliament Rolls from 1402 stated "the commons prayed for a remedy from the great hardship among the poor on account of the scarcity of small coins, which used to be the most useful form of money, but are now scarce, because none are made." In 1508-13 Erasmus wrote "..... nowadays Flanders is familiar with copper coins, England with lead ones". These statements highlight the lack of proper coinage throughout England during this period and suggest that tokens of both tin and lead were used as currency instead.

Although of significant archaeological importance, tokens are often recovered by amateur metal detectorists and it is uncertain how many have been found. Museum collections are typically small and the ones held in private collections are rarely analysed properly, are poorly dated and of uncertain provenance without proper archaeological context. Consequently research about tokens is limited and geographically biased. Only 68 of the 1388 officially recorded tokens are considered of 'northern' origin. This bias reflects the typically more rugged terrain of northern Britain generally avoided by detectorists. Some 1250 tokens recovered from the Thames foreshore and nearby were analysed in significant detail. These were found to be made of tin, pewter and lead and issued between 1200 and 1672.

Tokens were used in various ways. In Mereaux and Notre dame de Paris, chaplains received tokens for attending church services. At Calais and St Omer tokens issued by the ecclesiastical authorities could be exchanged for food and drink at approved inns and were then redeemed by the issuing authority. At Nevers in France possession of particular tokens gave the holder the right to cry (advertise), carry and sell certain commodities. As tokens have often been recovered around ports such as London, Dublin and Paris they were assumed to

serve some purpose in international trade However none were found during extensive excavations of Southampton port suggesting they were only of local significance

The largest cache of medieval lead tokens ever found was in Dublin. The so-called 'Winetavern' series excavated in 1962-3 includes 2061 tokens with 18 designs dating from 1250-1275. They are thought to have been used for trade in local taverns. Fifty 13-15th century tokens were discovered at Trig Lane in London. These included some Winetavern examples, suggesting they had value outside their area of origin. Tokens have also been found in Cambridgeshire (Ramsay Abbey), Suffolk (St Nicolas or 'Big Boy' token). Gloucester (St Mary de Lode) and Essex (Waltham Abbey).

There were thirteen Cistercian monasteries in the north, from the borders of Lancashire and Yorkshire to the Scottish borders . Many are associated with lead tokens ... the guest house at Kirkstall Abbey, at Newmister, at Tintern Abbey dated to 1250-1300, and at Rievaulx Abbey. A mixed collection of stamped and cast round and square tokens was discovered at Fountains Abbey and token mould was at Dundrennan, Scotland in the 1990s, Tokens excavated at these sites and at Dundrennan Abbey in particular, provide a very useful context for those found at Holme Cultram as the two Abbey's held adjacent lands in the south of Scotland.

The design and lettering on the Holme Cultram Abbey tokens seems to tie function to place and perhaps to Abbey charters. The letters SEL appearing on some tokens probably represents the French for salt. Some depicting ships may refer to the Abbeys trading boats. Perhaps such tokens might have been used in exchange for commodities such as as salt or ale at trading ports. There is also an association of the Abbey with Flimby (formerly Flemingby). Flimby had forestry rights granted by Richard I and tokens depicting cows or deer may have been exchanged for meat or hunting.

Medieval tokens were clearly used as a way of paying or exchanging goods or services in more local situations where universally recognized coinage was unavailable. The tokens appear to denote something was promised or that something would happen by exchanging them. Presumably this could only have worked successfully where the issuing authority was recognized and trusted by the users. Such tokens would have provided a way to manage the flow of goods around the estates - an abbey might issue tokens to local granges or traders in exchange for goods or labour to be redeemed at some later time. Alternatively a beneficiary of charity or an abbey tenant could provide the abbey with goods or labour in exchange for tokens with redeemable value. Or perhaps such exchanges might have occurred between a beneficiary of charity or tenant, and granges or traders so long as the tokens were mutually recognized and accepted as having a certain exchangeable value. The Cistercian Abbeys were well placed to issue such tokens giving their local populations a licence to draw upon its store of food or other assets. How far tokens issued by one Abbey were recognized by the wider community or other Abbeys is uncertain. However although the Cistercian monasteries were often isolated in remote locations, there were probably close ties between them, quite possibly with commercial and financial links.

By the end of the 14th century the economic fortunes of the Abbeys had changed. During the late 13th century many houses specialising in wool production overextended themselves by selling wool (and crops) several years in advance to Italian merchants. This led to financial disaster in 1280 when a major outbreak of sheep scab decimated flocks and they then had to purchase expensive wool on the open market to fulfill their obligations. By the end of the century, Fountains Abbey was in debt by over £6,000 - a huge sum at that time and the others fared little better. The number of monks began to decline and the Cistercians became less popular as new urban friaries were established. Abbey granges were devastated during Scottish incursions during the early 14th century when the Abbeys were required to support the English armies. The Black Death decimated the population in the middle of the century with a further negative impact on trade, economic growth and working population. The use of tokens may

have begun to decline at this time as a result.

The Mitchiner and Skinner review of English tokens published in 1983 now requires significant revision, as understanding of their several functions had grown, with increasing evidence of their use across the country and not just in the south or east. They may even have had different local functions though without written records this will never be clear.

In her summary at the end of the talk, Kate highlighted the importance of previously unknown token series of generally similar design with minor variations, associated with the Cistercian monasteries in the north of England. The use of such tokens within the Cistercian monastic system probably provided a simple pragmatic way to encourage trade in service and goods. With increasing understanding, it is now clear that many more token assemblages need to be studied and analysed in detail, if we are to understand their purpose more completely at both local and national levels.

Reports on the excavations can be read in more detail at <https://www.grampusheritage.co.uk/projects/abbey-town-survey-and-excavation/> headed related downloads. Reference: Mitchiner, M. and Skinner A., 1983. 'English Tokens. 1200 To 1425' in British Numismatic Journal 53, 29 - 77.

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